

THE BUFFALO NEWS

Another voice / Passport controversy

Solution needs to be simple, economical and accessible

Monday, June 25, 2007

By Thomas M. Reynolds

Today, the secretary of Homeland Security will visit Buffalo to discuss the now infamous Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative, the system to require anyone re-entering the United States at land borders — such as by car at the Peace Bridge — to have a passport or a secure travel document.

Many Western New Yorkers, and for that matter members of Congress, did not know how inept Michael Chertoff's department and the State Department would be in their efforts to implement this new system. Instead of working together, these two mammoth bureaucracies engaged in a turf war.

What the two departments should have been working on was a plan for a simple and secure travel document for all U.S. citizens, like they said they were. Instead they offered empty promises like the Rice-Chertoff Joint Vision: Secure Borders and Open Doors in the Information Age, in January 2006.

This "joint vision" outlined the steps the departments were taking to develop a "secure, less expensive passport card for the U.S. land border" crossings. Instead, the agencies responded to their own failure by calling on all travelers to purchase a \$97 passport. Predictably, this short-sighted and illogical decision has created record backlogs and creates more headaches every day.

What American travelers deserve is a document that is realistic to implement and affordable for all citizens — a system that is simple, economical and accessible. One way of providing just this type of system is by enhancing the driver's license.

This approach is no pipe dream; it is already being implemented in the state of Washington, where residents will be able to apply for an enhanced driver's license embedded with radio frequency identification technology. This technology will allow U.S. citizens to travel back and forth freely without the hassle of applying for a passport.

This "advanced" technology is similar to something Americans use every day: their bank cards. Why can't our government develop a card that is secure and convenient for Americans for border travel when Visa and Master-Card already use that technology?

New York has the ability to develop an enhanced driver's license, yet a state cannot simply jump head first into a new initiative without the direction, guidance and authorization of the federal government.

On his visit to Buffalo, Chertoff will surely see our region's dependence on trade and tourism with Canada. He will hear that Buffalo is home to the second busiest border crossing along the northern border and that Canadians visiting New York spend more than \$560 million annually.

I also want him to hear this: Mr. Chertoff, once and for all, get it right — secure our borders by implementing a plan that won't devastate our economy, but rather is simple, economical and accessible. Otherwise, next time you come to Buffalo, be sure to bring your passport. If you can get it on time.

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